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Listening to Men Learning

An Exploration of Men's Learning Preferences in Community Contexts

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Abstract: This paper reports on the results of a study of the learning preferences of adult males in small, rural Australian towns. The researcher employed a survey of men in each of ten towns in 2004 to explore and compare their learning experiences and preferences — in adult and community education (ACE) programs on one hand, and in community-based volunteer organisations (fire services, landcare senior citizens and football clubs) on the other. The research is considered timely given that male learning preferences generally, and the relatively low levels of male involvement in ACE in Australia in particular, remain poorly understood and researched. The focus of the study on small (population less than 2,500) rural towns and its exploration of less formal learning contexts is also deliberate. It acknowledges the relatively poor outcomes from school exhibited by Australian rural boys, and the very limited choice for their fathers and grandfathers to engage in formal learning programs in sites other than ACE. The main findings the study reports are what and how men in the five community organisations surveyed say they want to learn. The research confirms the considerable importance for men of regular learning experienced in less formal learning contexts as community volunteers, and highlights the barriers ICT poses for older men. It also identifies approaches to learning provision in ACE and other community-based contexts that are more likely to attract and retain men. The research and its investigations of gender segmentation in adult learning in small town settings have important potential implications for adult learning practice in rural communities generally, and for men learning through ACE in particular.

Keywords: Men, Learning Preferences, Community Contexts, Volunteers, Adult and Community Education

Introduction

THIS PAPER EXPLORES men's learning preferences and adult and community education (ACE) and other community contexts in small, rural towns in the State of Victoria, Australia as well as the broader implications of those preferences. It is based on the most recent study in a suite of research by the author, with other researchers, into aspects of adult learning in small towns (Golding and Rogers 2001), fire and emergency services volunteers in small and remote towns (Hayes, Golding and Harvey 2004), adult learning in small and remote towns (Golding 2004) and men involved in ACE or as volunteers in community-based organisations (Golding, Harvey and Echter 2004).

Gender segmentation has long been recognised in education. However that segmentation has, until very recently, seldom been studied other than from a perspective that assumes it is women and girls who are missing or disadvantaged in learning contexts. This is despite the historic under-representation of men in ACE and emerging evidence of problems for boys in some school-based learning contexts. The paper primarily uses insights from recent data from surveys of men in ACE and community-based volunteer organisations in small rural towns, to tease out what learning men are currently doing or would do, and how learning might be configured to meet their particular learning interests and preferences.

The reason for the focus on small rural towns is that the ACE provider in such towns is usually the only public site accessible to adult learners. Unlike in larger towns and cities, small towns seldom have access to a local TAFE provider. In small, rural towns the ACE provider is typically the only site that provides public access to computers and internet and to associated computer-based learning programs. In effect, if adults, including men in small rural towns, don't use the local ACE provider and don't travel away from town to learn, the learning they experience is likely to be through less formal learning contexts, individuals and organisations beyond ACE.

Golding (2004) previously explored gender segmentation of adult learning in small and objectively remote Australian communities and provided new evidence that males in many small and remote communities are in need of learning spaces that meet their particular and different needs. It argued that while the ACE participation and research data indicated despite men's relative absence from ACE,

> men are nonetheless learning on the farm and in businesses, they are particularly learning 'by doing'. However, the learning men do tends to be less long-term, strategic or discretionary. Typically men learn what *has* to be learned just

> in time for a particular practical purpose. …. In essence, while men's participation in VET [Vocational Education and Training] in quantitative terms is not radically different from that of women, men's learning in VET tends to 'lack the *quality of engagement* (or perhaps immersion) in the community' (see Beckett & Helme 2001, p.13, their emphasis).

The research was framed in the wake of the House of Representatives (2002, p.62) report into the education of boys that included the note[1] that

> A number of assumptions developed during two decades of activity in girls education have been uncritically carried forward into the renamed gender strategies. While it may not be fashionable to argue male disadvantage, it is important to recognise the extent to which boys and men in small and remote towns are particularly disengaged from learning and therefore disengaged.

A citation from Baker (1996, p.32), based on UK research, provided part of the expanding rationale for this study focusing only on men.

> While it is easy to applaud the demise of male domination in the workplace - an outcome certainly overdue – it is nevertheless still crucial to acknowledge the profound effect such a change has on men's sense of themselves. It cannot be right that so many men are left feeling confused, angry; dispossessed and powerless without that experience being publicly acknowledged and discussed.

The Current Research

Questions posed about gender segmentation and its effects on adult learning (Golding 2004, pp.236-7) became the foundation of the current research by Golding, Harvey and Echter (2004). It involved a ten-town, survey-based study of learning by adult males in small rural Victorian towns. Specifically, it explored the observed under-representation of rural men (Accessibility Remoteness Index of Australia - ARIA within the 'moderately accessible' range 1.7 to 3.7) and in adult and community education contexts as broadly defined. The research was therefore deliberately inclusive of men's learning both in and beyond narrowly defined ACE 'providers' funded by governments. The survey was specifically directed to men (not at school) who had accessed local ACE programs or services in the previous twelve months or who were involved as participants and volunteers in four other community-based organisations.

These included four other, surrogate learning organisation 'types': the local football club, landcare organisation, senior citizens club and the fire brigade. The intention of surveying men beyond ACE was to find out what learning men were currently doing or would do; what their learning preferences, attitudes and experiences were, and how learning in ACE might be configured to better meet men's particular learning interests and preferences. In its exploration of significant differences between sub-groups of men Golding, Harvey and Echter (2004) revealed that previous formal education experiences, at and post-school, were relatively limited for most rural men.

The survey response rate was 46 per cent (N=399), comprising around one third (34%) men who completed the survey in an ACE context, one third in service organisations (17% fire and 14% landcare) and one third in either football clubs or senior citizens clubs (22% and 14% respectively). The respondents were not a random group of men, being skewed towards an older group of relatively active and involved men from small rural towns. One in five were aged less than 24 years; 42% 35-54 years and 38% 55 years or over). Forty one per cent per cent had been a member of the organisation for more than ten years, one third (33%) held leadership roles and 59 per cent had been associated with the town for more than 20 years.

Findings

This research confirmed that men experience important and valued learning through their experience as volunteers and participants in community organisations more so than as 'students' in ACE. Golding, Harvey and Echter (2004) provided strong and disturbing new evidence of the ongoing and debilitating effects of negative experiences at school on involvement in lifelong learning and community activity for men of all ages. Being an active part of a community organisation was shown to play a key role in men's current learning and provide critical opportunities for further and lifelong learning in ways that ACE apparently struggles to provide. Though relatively few men 'really enjoyed' learning at school and one in five were limited in their ability to engage in learning by their limited literacy skills, most men shared a clear desire to learn for a wide range of purposes in less formal, practical, group settings.

Consistent with the conclusions in McGivney's (1999a) study, most men wanted any extra learning delivered locally – preferably through their own organisations and generally not through ACE. Overall, most men expressed a keen desire to learn by being

[1] R, Fletcher, Submission no.166, p.4, cited on p.62.

actively involved in an activity rather than passively learning 'about' something. Golding, Harvey and Echter's research throws new light on the critical and positive role played by active and frequent involvement in volunteer community activity through service and leisure organisations in small rural towns. It highlights the current problems ACE has attracting men as learners - despite the value they clearly placed on learning - and the expressed needs of men of all ages to keep learning. Four out of ten men did not know enough about the local ACE provider to use it, and one in five did not feel comfortable going there.

The cross-organisational survey design allowed, for the first time, exploration, and comparison of a number of significant differences of learning-related variables by type of organisation in which men were participants. Men surveyed in the five organisation types learnt in significantly differently ways. In general, learning as a consequence of participation within and through non-ACE service and leisure organisations was more effective for men than learning through ACE. On most learning-related criteria, fire, football and senior citizens organisations in particular fulfilled a number of critical, learning-related roles for men who were actively involved in those organisations. Importantly, learning through regular and active community participation in familiar social and cultural settings is more effective and more closely matched to men's learning preferences than learning through a local ACE provider – even for men who are already users of ACE.

Fire and senior citizens organisations provided men with significantly more opportunities than the local ACE provider for learning in modes preferred by men: through regular practice, by taking on responsibility through the organisation and for one-on-one learning. As Hayes, Golding and Harvey (2004) had anticipated, fire organisations also provided significantly more opportunities for accredited learning through the organisation than ACE provides for men to learn through special interest courses.

Nevertheless local ACE providers facilitated significantly more opportunities to learn through the internet than did the other organisations. For many men who needed internet skills, particularly those involved in senior citizens and landcare organisations, there remained large gaps between the importance of internet skills and self rating of those skills, that ACE does not currently meet. Of the organisations surveyed, ACE users were significantly more likely to agree that the small size of the organisation made their learning easier, but were significantly more likely to regard ACE as a mainly 'women's organisation'.

Men involved in organisations other than ACE were significantly more involved as participants and also in leadership roles in those organisations than men who participated in ACE. They were also more satisfied that their level of skill allowed them to take an active part in their organisation and significantly less likely than ACE users to regard opportunities to learn elsewhere in their communities as limited. Non-ACE organisation participants were significantly more likely than ACE participants were to value the importance of skills to take responsible positions in community organisations. Most men that did not use the local ACE provider nevertheless regarded it as a valuable resource and around nine out of ten would use it anytime if they really needed it.

A number of factors affected men's attitudes to and participation in learning. Men in smaller rural towns were significantly more active participants in their organisation's activities than in larger towns. They were also more likely to regard opportunities to learn elsewhere in the community as limited, and more likely to regard the local ACE provider as a useful place to do a course. Men in the more remote towns showed somewhat similar trends to those in smaller towns, but importantly, were around one half as likely to agree (only 16 per cent in remoter towns agreed) that they 'really enjoyed learning at school' than men in less remote towns.

There is evidence of a clear link between knowledge about learning and community involvement. Men who had been involved in organisations for more than ten years were significantly more active and interested learners on a whole range of adult learning criteria, but being older, had more limited computer and internet skills and held relatively negative attitudes towards the local ACE provider.

Men who knew enough about the local ACE provider to use it were significantly more involved in their own organisation's activities and more aware of the opportunities to learn through those organisations. Men who don't know enough about the local ACE provider to use it were significantly more satisfied with their current skill levels and less likely to take part in learning - even through their own organisation. Men with a limited knowledge of the local ACE provider were much more likely to feel uncomfortable using the local ACE provider. They were also around twice as likely to be older, not know other people using the provider and regard it as a women's space - than men with a good working knowledge of ACE. For the small number of towns surveyed, the position of the ACE provider in town appeared to affect men's attitudes to the provider. Around twice as many men in towns where the provider was shopfront did not feel comfortable going there as men where the ACE provider was not shopfront.

Age was a significant intervening variable in terms of men's attitudes to and involvement in learning

generally, and to ACE in particular. Younger men had significantly higher internet and computer skills, were much less comfortable about going to the local ACE provider and were more likely to regard it as a 'women's space'. Around six out of ten men aged 24 years or younger did know enough about the local ACE provider to use it and over one half considered it did not currently offer anything they needed to learn. At the other extreme, men over 55 years had more negative and limited experiences of formal learning and ICT and were also unlikely to access ACE.

The survey provided strong and disturbing evidence of the ongoing and debilitating effects of negative experiences at school on involvement in lifelong learning and community activity for men of all ages. On a large number of criteria, men who did not 'really enjoy learning at school' not only had significantly less positive attitudes to adult learning but were much less actively involved in community organisations. They participated significantly less frequently, were less interested in more learning, regarded public speaking skills less highly and rated their computer skills lower. Men who did not enjoy school learning were significantly less likely to be active or hold leadership roles in organisation or to have recently been involved in formal learning programs. In order for them to participate in ACE, courses would need to be shorter and their general attitude that they are 'too old' as adults to be involved in learning - would also need to be addressed.

Attitudes toward school – and many other learning-related criteria were found to be significantly related to completion of higher year levels at school. Men who left school earlier (particularly older men) had significantly lower internet skills. These differences flowed through into significant differences in men's post-school education. Men with any form of education or training completed post-school had significantly more opportunities for learning through their community involvement than men with no formal post-school experience. Men with limited post-school education completions also had significantly lower internet skills, were more likely to regard their age as a barrier to learning and to be attracted by learning opportunities in smaller organisations.

Implications

One core aim of this research –to investigate and address reasons for men's lack of engagement in ACE - might be regarded by feminists as problematic in gender terms. Gender equity has come to invariably mean establishing equity for women in education and work. The 2002 Australian inquiry into the education of boys (House of Representatives 2002, p.61) encountered attitudes similar to those encountered in the current research into the learning experienced by men, that is that

> some gender equity units in education departments and education unions, generally, have been reluctant to openly confront boy's underachievement and disengagement as an issue, perhaps for fear of undermining ongoing support for strategies for girls.

That 'women clearly outnumber men as learners and workers in ACE (Golding, Davies and Volkoff 2001, p.68) has widely been considered normal and unproblematic. ACFEB (1996) noted a decade ago that 'Women have constituted 75 per cent of Australian adult education participants for the past 75 years or more but this has received very little strategic focus in research policy or planning within the adult education field.' ACE has a strong feminist history and has very successfully and deliberately positioned itself as a sector of choice in adult education for many women. Golding, Davies and Volkoff (2001, p.68) noted that their comprehensive review of Australian ACE research that literature on ACE 'is generally underpinned and informed by women's and feminist perspectives.'

This male researcher has tried to take what male researchers Lingard and Douglas (1999, p.4) describe as a 'pro-feminist' position, which, as they acknowledge, is 'a position easier to describe than practise'. This position '… sees the need to change men and masculinities, as well as masculinist social structures, while recognising the hidden injuries of gender for many men and boys. To paraphrase Lingard and Douglas, though the author 'vehemently rejects' the idea of 'a turning away from a concern' with the education of women, (p.4) I do suggest the need for '… more equal gender relations that requires, inter alia, a policy and practice focus in education' (p.5) for both men and women. A pro-feminist position is particularly difficult to sustain if the current research is portrayed by what Lingard and Douglas (1999, p.115) describe as a 'competing victims' syndrome' in relation to male and female educational disadvantage. Similarly, a pro-feminist position would be inconsistent with any over-claims - based on the current study, that *all* rural men are disadvantaged (or women are advantaged) by virtue of their statistically low representation (or women's over-representation) in ACE.

While the current research drifts into what Rowan, Knobel, Bigum and Lankshear (2002, p.5) would describe as 'dangerous or hostile terrain', it sails closest to a feminist storm, the pro-feminist breeze and a competing victims' syndrome by arguing, on solid evidence, that ACE in Australia has tended to become a site of feminizing practice and for 'doing' femininity (after Connell 1996 and Lingard and

Douglas 1999, p.118). In much the same way, the Australian vocational education and training sector, TAFE (Technical and Further Education), tended until relatively recently to become a site for masculinised practice and 'doing' masculinity. Small rural ACE providers are often located in 'houses' set up, staffed and maintained mainly by women. The centre décor, the layout, the posters, the program and the opening hours tend to be oriented towards and embrace women and their particular and different needs.

The very act of deliberately researching and theorising about men in ACE can certainly be portrayed by critics as 'part of the backlash against women, based on notions of men's 'oppression' and pitting the needs of [men] against those of [women]' (after McLean 1996, pp.65-6). Like Knobel, Bigum and Lankshear (2002, p.5), the author takes the view that it is important for educators to develop skills to navigate and negotiate such tricky terrain. An alternative reading, similar to the approach taken in Lingard and Douglas (1999, p.123) and the one intended here, is that any form of hegemonic femininity or masculinity can be dangerous to both men and women. Despite the dangers of being misquoted, I am arguing that there should be a more overt recognition of the social construction of gender in ACE 'and a tolerance and acceptance of different practices of femininity and masculinity' if ACE is to be committed to gender equity.

It is possible to mount a similarly strong argument, from solid evidence, that women are so prevalent in ACE precisely because they are so disadvantaged in the workforce, generally less able to find secure, well paid, full time or tenured employment and the training and more interested than men in participating in non-work related learning in their own time. In this reading, men who are employed get preferential access to instrumental vocational learning through their employers, and as McGivney (2004, p.65) suggests, '… will lose face and standing with their peers if they depart from the established norms of male behaviour' and unlike 'real' men engage as adults in learning. As McGivney argues, while men tend to earn, women tend to learn: 'Learning is seen by men as an unacceptable form of vulnerability' (p.68) and 'something that children, retired people or women do.' (p.65). Similarly to Bull and Anstey (1995), Hayes, Golding and Harvey (2004, p.36) found that

> in many rural communities literacy, as it is traditionally defined was seem more as 'women's work'. 'Conversely men generally saw literacy in more functional terms in order to complete tasks or to augment work' (Bull and Anstey p.9)'.

While feminists acknowledge that men are indeed under-represented in ACE and experience issues with learning and literacy, they are generally reluctant to countenance or acknowledge men's and boy's disadvantage. Many share an understandable concern about likely misreading or simplifications of research findings – even of careful, nuanced and well-meaning research about men's different patterns of participation in formal and informal learning. There is a concern that research that identifies men's disadvantage might take the focus off funding or support of programs to address women's disadvantage, still experienced by women in terms of participation in - and particularly outcomes from - education and training more broadly. This research, like the House of Representatives (2002, p.61) inquiry into boys, has encountered some reluctance, even within research communities, 'to openly confront the possibility of [men's] under-achievement and disengagement as an issue, perhaps for fear of undermining ongoing support for strategies for [women].'

Feminists particularly counter suggestions of simple sectoral exclusion of men from ACE, implied in the title of McGivney's (1999) Excluded Men: men who are missing from education and training in the UK, but more nuanced on a careful reading of that work. McGivney in fact says that some of the 'missing' men

> are not deliberately avoiding education: they are systematically excluded from it by employers, education institutions and the system governing programmes and welfare benefits for the unemployed. (McGivney 1999, p.70)

Because the current research was limited essentially to survey data, it was not possible to prove or conclude that broader structural exclusions for men identified in UK education contexts by McGivney (1992) apply in the case of all Australian ACE. The current research focused on and identified some support for the alternative or parallel possibility identified by McGivney (1999, p.70) that men's reluctance to engage in education and training might be related 'to lack of interest, fear of failure or the embracing of traditional masculine values'. Its findings provide evidence of either men's withdrawal or structural exclusion. These findings warrant careful further interpretation and qualification.

It is possible to ague that men: either because of negative previous experiences of formal education; because the local ACE provider doesn't offer anything they want to learn; because they don't feel comfortable learning alongside women in what they regard as female spaces; because the learning styles and pedagogies don't suit them - should simply get over it' and go elsewhere to learn other than in ACE. It is certainly possible - in capital and regional cities in Australia - to point to the Australian public vocational education and training sector – TAFE (Tech-

nical and Further Education) as an appropriate men's alternative. TAFE has traditionally been regarded as a 'men's place'- with a general focus on vocational training for male dominated trades and with mainly male staff and students, though this profile is also changing. However, because this study was deliberately restricted to rural men with only one public site for accessing adult learning in a community context, there are no obvious alternatives for men - other than in the local ACE provider, to have ready access to a computer or associated ICT services or to do a range of local adult education courses.

It is important to note that the ACE providers in this study along with their all-female coordinators were acutely aware of the dearth of men amongst their participants. Though they were frustrated by their inability to reach men, there was a general recognition, summarised in UK contexts by McGivney (1999, p.69), that since 'adult community education is seen as a service for women [it] consequently has a limited appeal for men', partly because 'they are mostly staffed by women. As Tett (1994) had identified, 'many adult and community education programmes are designed to help women gain new interests and achieve personal goals [and] therefore do not attract men who have a more instrumental attitude to learning.' (McGivney 1999, p.69).

It is similarly important to record that ACE providers in Australia have been subject to government pressure through their diverse and complex State and Federal funding arrangements and Australian competition policy to make programs more instrumental and more vocational. In Australian cities and towns larger than those in the current study ACE providers have program profiles approaching those of some vocational (TAFE) providers and attract a higher proportion of men. In New South Wales VET delivered in ACE now accounts for around half of ACE programs and funding.

Adult and community education community in Australia (particularly where it exists as a discrete sector in Victoria and New South Wales) has been frustrated by increasing government insistence that the sector justify its existence by becoming more instrumental, more competitive and more vocational. There has been an unquestioning tendency in both ACE and VET to conflate participation with a simple count of learners formally enrolled in its providers and programs. This research provides evidence consistent with Hodges' (1998) suggestion, based in part on Lave and Wenger's (1991, p.35) earlier finding, that rather than being a simple numeric measure, participation in communities of practice, in this case particularly in voluntary, community-based organisations like sporting clubs or fire and emergency services brigades,

> is socially constructed, interwoven with the detailed fabrics of the community of practice and the negotiated processes of membership and participation. In this way, participation is defined as ways of belonging, where belonging is, "… not only a crucial condition for learning, but a constituent element of its content." (p.35)
>
> Hodges 1998, p,8.

The current research provides strong evidence for something that is, on the surface, confounding and counter-intuitive: that for men in rural communities, active participation in communities of practice beyond ACE is more conducive to learning than involvement or enrolment in ACE. These counter-intuitive findings - that active involvement in, community-based surrogate learning organisations like football clubs, senior citizens and fire brigades are more effective learning environments for men that participate in them than ACE if for men who participate in ACE programs prompts the adoption of an alternative theoretical perspective. Men's tendency not to participate in ACE, observed in ACE numeric participation data and explored by survey in this study, but to report significant learning experiences in community-organisations, prompts a move away from regarding or valuing participation in ACE as knowledge-construction.

Conclusion

The research suggests an alternative conclusion about men's relatively low participation in ACE that shifts the focus away from men or ACE (or women in ACE) as *the* problem. Rather than concluding that rural men are not learning because they are not involved in ACE or that there aren't enough men's programs, the findings suggest an alternative and more complex conclusion. That is that for a range of reasons identified in the detailed findings: that men with negative experiences of formal learning are reluctant to present for more learning – particularly in a space largely inhabited by people, particularly women, with a passion for learning. In essence, men generally don't feel like they belong in ACE: in the case of the small rural towns studied, even when it is the only local space for accessing adult learning programs and services. The same conclusion might apply to women who don't feel like they belong in a wide range of organisations where men tend to hold sway: over the learning space, the décor, the pedagogy or the programs.

Hodges (1998, p.9) suggests that 'What emerges as crucial, then, is less the "content" of education, and more substantially the quality of the person's participation within this educative community.' What is being offered though ACE and learned by men in ACE is arguably less valuable than the learning men

experience through belonging to and participating in surrogate learning organisations as volunteers – with men and women in other communities of practice. Learning, through this perspective, as Hodges (1998, p.9) observes, '… is an ontological transformation, not an epistemological effect.' Putting it another way, men tend not to use ACE because they tend not to feel like they belong in ACE - or experience a quality of participation in the ACE community of practice as they experience it in some other community contexts.

Using a somewhat similar theoretical lens to that used by Hodges (1998, p.8), it is however possible to conclude from the data that around one in five men feel like they do not belong in ACE providers because they are comprised primarily of women. Though hard to countenance for women from a gender equity perspective, it is possible to argue that this is because participation is organised by female structures of privilege that deny men's difference and diversity.

The research and its findings raises some important unanswered but tantalising questions for planned future research: about whether 'men's sheds': recent grass-roots solutions for increasing numbers of older men in communities throughout Australia - are solving or exacerbating the cleft stick that many men find themselves in as learners - with a desperate need for learning that they are unable to admit to or address. Is the apparently deliberate retreat by some men away from ACE towards community-based sporting, service and emergency service organisations normal, natural and unproblematic? Is the 'male only shed' a form of the modern day Masonic Lodge? Do men-only learning and community organisations solve or perpetuate men's isolation and difference? Is it akin to some women retreating to a position of learning strength with other women in the 'community house'? To what extent are men's sheds colonised by men who eschew a competing victims' syndrome? Does an 'ACE for women and sheds for men' strategy risk a form of adult education apartheid based on gender? To what extent are the findings of the current study simply confirmation of real, 'natural' and inter-generational differences in rural men's and boy's preferences for hands-on, practical, outdoor and instrumental learning styles and pedagogies?

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